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FM AMEMBASSY COLOMBO

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 1162
INFO RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA PRIORITY 2298
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD PRIORITY 9320
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU PRIORITY 7575
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 5400
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 3735
RUEHNY/AMEMBASSY OSLO PRIORITY 5325
RUEHOT/AMEMBASSY OTTAWA PRIORITY 0186
RUEHMD/AMEMBASSY MADRID PRIORITY 0140
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 4447
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI PRIORITY 9883
RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI PRIORITY 7170
RUEHON/AMCONSUL TORONTO PRIORITY 0181
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA PRIORITY 0028
RHHMUNA/HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI PRIORITY
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS PRIORITY
RHEHAAA/NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 000056

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INSB

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/24/2020

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PREF](#) [PHUM](#) [PTER](#) [FAID](#) [MOPS](#) [CE](#)
SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: ELECTIONS UPDATE NO. 11

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Classified By: AMBASSADOR PATRICIA A. BUTENIS. REASONS: 1.4 (B, D)

THE Y2K ELECTION:
PEACEFUL OR TUMULTUOUS?

[11](#). (C) (Rel to UK, CAN, AUS, SWITZ.) On the eve of an historic presidential election in Sri Lanka, the leading candidates appear to be neck-and-neck, with no one able to predict how events will unfold. Scenarios -- often offered by the same observer -- range from a peaceful handover of power to large-scale social unrest and violence. The government has declared Wednesday, January 27 a legal holiday, and many Sri Lankans anticipate a curfew will be imposed as well. The Embassy will close at 16:00 local time on January 26 and remain closed January 27, except for elections-essential personnel.

[12](#). (C) (Rel to UK, CAN, AUS, SWITZ.) There is a potential for some post-election violence, and tensions in some locations appear to be very high. Violence is more likely to

be between Sinhalese supporters of the two main candidates, rather than to involve Tamil voters. Additional scattered reports of violence continued to come in over the weekend from a number of different locations. How each side reacts to a close vote, and in particular a close vote where there are widespread allegations of fraud, is difficult to predict.

One long-time JVP member of parliament told PolOff his JVP supporters would not be robbed of what they saw as certain victory and that they would be in the streets protesting if the win was stolen from them. Many opposition organizers and supporters in the southern Hambantota district admitted to PolOff they were nervous about what might happen to them if Rajapaksa prevailed. Other observers told us that Rajapaksa organizers and officials could see there was a very real chance he could lose and were fearful of retaliation by Fonseka supporters if that happened. See ref. B for Post reporting on how the security forces might handle significant post-election violence.

CHANDRIKA ENDORSES FONSEKA

¶3. (C) (Rel to UK, CAN, AUS, SWITZ.) The last endorsement of a candidate occurred on the morning of January 24, when General Fonseka was received by former president Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga at the memorial to her late father, SLFP founder S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike. While it is unknown how much this last-minute endorsement will sway any remaining undecided SLFP voters, symbolically it is a stinging rebuke of President Rajapaksa by the veritable grandmother of the party he now purports to lead.

RUMORS OF FRAUD ATTEMPTS ABOUND

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¶4. (C) (Rel to UK, CAN, AUS, SWITZ.) Unverifiable rumors of various fraud attempts swirled around Colombo and the text-messaging social network of Sri Lanka over the final pre-election weekend. There were reports that a military truck had been stopped in the town of Karunagala inappropriately carrying some 90 ballot boxes. Elections monitors reported to PolOff that they knew of some 25 stuffed ballot boxes being held at a secret location near the southern town of Tangalle. Unclaimed voter registration cards at post offices in areas in the north led to suspicions by some that these would be used to cast fraudulent ballots. Because voter lists have not been updated for many years in some of these locations, voter cards have been prepared for Tamil voters who may have died or left the country years ago.

A majority of observers seem to believe that a key vulnerability exists in the transportation of ballot boxes from polling stations to counting centers.

"PREFERENCE" VOTING -- WHAT'S THE DEAL?

¶5. (C) (Rel to UK, CAN, AUS, SWITZ.) The Sri Lankan constitution requires a presidential candidate to receive at least 50 percent plus one vote to be declared the winner outright. If neither Rajapaksa nor Fonseka makes it over this hurdle, election officials will consider "preference" votes (voters manually cast their votes for first, second, and third choices on the paper ballots). Candidates who were not in first or second place are eliminated from the contest and the ballots of those who voted for them are consulted to determine their second preferences. If the second preference on a ballot is for either of the two top candidates, the vote is added to that candidate's total. If a voter's first and second preferences had been for neither of the top two candidates but his or her third preference was, that third-preference vote is added to the candidate's total. Whoever receives a majority of the votes so counted is declared the victor. In case of a tie, lots are drawn to determine the winner.

16. (C) (Rel to UK, CAN, AUS, SWITZ.) Sri Lanka has never had to utilize this preference system in its presidential elections -- someone always won at least 50 percent plus one.

The system has been utilized, however, in provincial-council elections. In those elections, election officials -- who presumably were up all night counting the first choices on ballots -- were given at least a twelve-hour rest before the counting of the preferences began. We are unclear at this point whether such a rest period -- which would significantly delay the tabulation of results, leaving the country on the edge of its collective seat -- will be provided.

BUTENIS